

To Be a Duke

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Jessie Clever



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For Mrs. Butts

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April 1826

London

“You are not at all concerned your wife will find out?”

Alec stood in the bedchamber of one of London’s most refined and most adventurous widows and casually replaced the stopper in the decanter of brandy. He set it carefully down on the gold-plated tray that seemed rather ostentatious even to him. Lady Hilary Hunisett had a reputation for ostentatiousness though, and he supposed the tray was simply indicative of the rumors circulating about the *ton*.

“My wife?” Alec said, turning to the woman now.

Lady Hunisett’s robe was tied loosely at the waist, its soft folds of silk accentuating the exposed expanse of her bosom. She was in rather good condition for her age and hedonistic lifestyle. Alec would have thought the woman’s drinking, poor eating habits, and reckless living would have taken their toll. But her skin was still firm and flawless, a porcelain white against the red silk of her night rail peeking out from under her robe.

Hilary Hunisett had been a catch during her season twenty years ago, or at least that was what Jane had told him. Alec wouldn’t have doubted it. It seemed the woman was still accustomed to such attention. Attention she now demanded from Alec.

“I think you need not worry about my wife,” Alec continued when no response from the woman came. Handing one of the brandy glasses to Lady Hunisett, he was careful to stroke her fingertips with his own. He could see the responding thrill illuminate Lady Hunisett’s eyes, and Alec smiled, allowing heat to enter his gaze.

Lady Hunisett smiled coyly, reaching up to toy with a strand of her auburn hair, twirling it around her finger before allowing the curl to fall and trickle invitingly down her bosom.

“Why is that, my lord?” Hunisett said.

Alec turned his smile into more of a smirk. “My wife is a simpleton, my lady,” Alec said, bending forward as if his words were a secret meant to be shared only between lovers. “Surely you’ve heard the story of where my father found her?”

Lady Hunisett looked up at him through long eyelashes, much darker than her auburn tresses. “The story?” she said.

Alec laughed softly, picking up his hand to run a single finger

along the line of her collarbone. She trembled under his touch, and Alec captured her gaze in his. "She's a nobody, I'm afraid," Alec said. "My father took pity on some old woman's charity case, and I've been strapped with the burden my entire life. You cannot imagine what I've been forced to endure with such a lowly bred wife. Just once I would like..."

His finger had trailed dangerously close to the valley between her breasts. He looked up at Hunisett's face, his mouth slightly agape, his eyes speaking of untold horrors, terrible afflictions he'd been forced to suffer during his awful marriage. Hunisett blinked, her lids closing slowly over her amber eyes, her gaze drinking him in until he felt completely absorbed.

"You poor man," she said. "Someone as extraordinary as you should never have had to suffer the way you have." She stepped closer to him, the folds of her robe rubbing against the fabric of his breeches. "Whatever can I do to make your life just a little more comfortable?" Here she slipped a single leg between his, her thigh rubbing against him in a most intimate manner.

Alec smiled. "Oh, I think I can come up with a couple of ideas of how you might help." He paused, took a sip of his brandy. "But first, you must tell me where you acquired this lovely brandy."

Hunisett's eyes flashed, and her smile grew devilish. "I have a source," she said. "A wonderful source who gets me the finest French brandy."

Alec laughed softly. "Of course, the finest brandy would be French, but this is rather exquisitely aged brandy. Tell me, my darling, could it have been acquired during that terrible skirmish with that Napoleon chap a few years ago?"

Hunisett tipped back her head and laughed, the sound that of bells tinkling in a soft wind. "Oh, you are lovely, Stryden," she said. "Of course, my source smuggled in brandy for me during the war. Do you think I would have gone without?" She reached up, ran a fingernail along the line of his jaw. "My man not only gets me fine brandy, my lord, but he's very capable of doing...other things...when I ask."

Alec raised a single eyebrow. "Is that so?" he asked.

Hunisett's smile faded into something more beguiling. "My man brings me the finest silks, the best tea, and the loveliest spices from India without having to go through the East India Company," Hunisett batted her eyelashes at him. "I haven't paid a single tax or fee on anything in years. I'm a rather spoiled woman, I'm afraid."

Alec smiled, reaching out to pull Hunisett closer. The movement brought her body against the length of his, and he cradled her in his arm. "And I know you would share your source with me, wouldn't you, my lady? I mean in the interest of improving my rather burdened

life?"

Hunisett smiled, reaching up that single finger to once more stroke the line of his jaw. She seemed to push herself higher against him, and her lips came closer to his. "His name is Lord Lucian Rye," she whispered, closing her eyes as she waited for his kiss.

Alec let go of her.

Lady Hunisett dropped to the floor with a rather impressive bang, her glass of brandy skittering across the floor. Her robe came completely open, revealing the red silk of her night rail beneath even as it rode up to her thighs.

"Stryden!" she squealed, but Alec wasn't paying her any attention as Viscount Pemberly opened the door of the bedchamber.

"Did you get that?"

Pemberly nodded. "Quite," he said, stepping into the room to haul Lady Hunisett to her feet. "Good evening, Lady Hunisett," he said as the woman struggled in his grasp. "It seems you have a previous engagement with the War Office."

Hunisett pulled against Pemberly's grip. "Who are you?" she screamed. "And how dare you invade my home like this? What is going on?"

Pemberly smiled softly as one would at a small child throwing a tantrum. "Smuggling goods into the country and avoiding the payment of requisite taxes and fees is illegal, Lady Hunisett, and there are some people who would like to speak with you about that."

Lady Hunisett pulled once more on her arm. "I will not be treated thusly," she said.

Pemberly laughed. "You should have thought about that before you broke the law," he said, chuckling as he removed Lady Hunisett from the room.

A team from the War Office waited in the corridor beyond and took Lady Hunisett into custody, happily denying the woman the opportunity to change into something more suitable. Alec smiled and bent to retrieve the glass that Lady Hunisett had dropped when a voice at the door had him straightening abruptly.

"An old woman's charity case?"

Alec grinned, his eyes lighting up with mirth for the first time that night as he took in the sight of his wife standing in the doorway.

"Lady Stryden, surely you know what I've suffered over these past several years," he said, striking a melodramatic pose.

Sarah laughed softly, coming through the door until she stood in front of him. She reached up and straightened his cravat before grasping the lapels of his jacket to pull him closer.

"Perhaps we should remedy that, my lord," she whispered, dragging him toward her for a scorching kiss.

"I fail to see how this may be of use one day, Grandfather."

Richard, the Duke of Lofton, looked down at his grandson, noting once more how much the boy looked like his father. Ashley had the same green eyes and straight black hair that fell across his brow no matter what he did to get it out of his face. Richard smiled.

"I assure you, lad," Richard said. "One day you may certainly need to understand where the islands around the Italian peninsula are in relation to each other."

"When will I ever be traveling to the Italian peninsula?" Ashley asked.

Richard could think of several scenarios in which that very thing could take place and sometimes without a person's knowledge or intent. But for now, he only assumed a stern expression.

"I think that is something best understood when you are older. For now, study that map until you can recite the names of the islands off the western coast."

Ashley grumbled a bit but bent to his task with a certain focus Richard knew only too well to be an innate quality of the Black men. Richard looked up from his studious grandson to find the lad's father coming through the library doors at an efficient clip, a missive in his hand.

"Have you seen this?" Alec asked, holding up the note in question.

Richard stood, feeling the ache in his bones as he unfolded himself from his position on the library floor next to his grandson. Before he could fully stand, Alec was at his elbow helping him, a look of concern across his features.

"I'm fine," Richard said. "I'm just getting too damn old to be squatting on the floor."

"Grandfather!" Ashley exclaimed from the floor in obvious response to Richard's use of inappropriate language.

"Just don't repeat it," he said down to the lad, and Ashley shook his head before returning to the maps strewn about the floor.

Alec's look of concern had not cleared by the time Richard turned back and took the missive from him. Scanning the letter, Richard frowned.

"Another infestation in the turnip crop," Richard mumbled as he read through his steward's letter. "He is not certain where the infestation started or what may have caused it." Richard looked up. "The tenants need the turnip crop for wintering the livestock. If it fails again this year, there will not be enough in reserves to get the animals through the winter."

Alec nodded, even as he started moving away, his long strides

taking him to the desk that sat on the other side of the room, the one Richard had used for so many years to manage the various estates that came with the title of the Duke of Lofton. And now Alec bent over its surface, his hands going through ledger after ledger as he presumably looked for the figures on the stock reserves of turnips.

Richard paused, the letter forgotten in his hand as he looked at his son. A grown man now, it wasn't hard for Richard to see Alec as the new duke. It was just...hard to believe. Richard still felt like a young man of twenty-three, newly titled, and foolishly thinking he could take on the world. But as he looked at his son, Richard knew he would leave the title in much better hands than the ones in which he had accepted it so many years ago.

"I'll need to go to Bedford as soon as possible," Alec said. "Manning cannot be expected to handle another infestation on his own."

Richard nodded at Alec's summation of the land steward. "An infestation of this size will take the brains and manpower of two leaders," Richard said. "I'll have my trunks readied."

Alec stopped in his perusal of the ledgers. "There's no need, Father," Alec said, looking up. "I'll go to Bedford and take care of the matter."

Richard paused in his walk to the door, turning to look at his son. Alec gazed at him with the green eyes of his mother, the same green eyes he had passed onto his son, Ashley. And Richard suddenly felt very old.

"You're right, I suppose," Richard said. "One day it will only be you here to handle these problems."

Alec frowned then, a crease forming between his brows. "When you say it like that, I think you should go pack your bags," Alec said.

Richard laughed, shaking his head. "No, son, you're right. It's time for you to take care of the estate on your own."

* * *

"He truly said that?"

Alec shoved the ledgers into the leather satchel he used to transport the books between the London townhouse and Lofton Estate in Bedford before looking up at his wife.

"He did," he said, a frown weighing on his lips as it had done for the past several hours since his father had told him he would not be around forever to handle the Lofton estate.

Sarah held their youngest, Michael, in her arms, distractedly trying to entertain him with a wooden horse. The toddler was having none of it and whimpered to be let down to wreak all manner of havoc on the

library shelves. Sarah transferred the boy to her other arm, handing him a bit of yarn that he joyfully accepted and began tying into ridiculous knots before the whole thing would fall apart, causing him to start again.

“Do you think...” Sarah’s voice trailed off. “Do you think something’s wrong, and he’s not telling us?”

Alec looked up from the last ledger. “Good Lord, surely not,” he said.

Sarah frowned at him. “Have you written to Nathan lately? Has he written to you? Perhaps Nora knows something.”

Alec shook his head at his wife’s rambling. “I’m sure if something were amiss, and my brother knew of it, we’d have heard something.”

“But perhaps Nathan has been too busy with the spring planting on his own land that he hasn’t had time-“

“To send a letter?” Alec finished the sentence for her with enough question on the end of it to have Sarah frowning harder at him. “He was a spy for the War Office, Sarah. I think he would find time to send a letter.”

Sarah’s frown faded into something different, a softened expression of curiosity that sounded an alarm somewhere in Alec’s head. “What is it?” he asked when she didn’t speak again.

“You said *was*.”

Alec blinked at her. “I beg your pardon.”

She jostled Michael a bit on her hip, and the toddler squealed in delight. “When speaking of Nathan being a spy, you used the past tense.”

Alec stopped fastening the buckles of the leather satchel, his hands frozen on the straps. He *had* used the past tense. When had he begun to understand that his brother’s life had taken a turn away from the War Office? And more, when had that even begun to happen? It was true that Nathan was now a happily married family man with a grown son and two precocious daughters. He had several acres in Kent that their father had deeded to him, and farming was a rather large part of his life now. But when was it that Alec had fully realized it?

When had his brother moved on without him?

Sarah continued to frown at him. “Are you all right?” she finally said, her voice soft.

Alec watched her, his wife of more than ten years, as she cradled their son in her arms. It was then that he realized that Nathan had not moved on without him. They had moved on together without actually acknowledging the fact of it.

A knock at the library door startled Alec out of his thoughts, and a footman entered, a sealed note on the silver tray in his hand.

“Just delivered for you, my lord.”

The footman left the letter on the desk and departed without Alec saying a word. The War Office's seal was clearly visible on the letter, and Alec felt his insides twist. Lying next to the newly delivered missive was the one from Manning indicating the infestation in the turnip crop. Never had the pull between his separate responsibilities been more acutely illustrated than in that moment.

His hands slid from the buckle of the satchel, but he stayed where he was staring at the deceptively plain scrawl marching across the parchment of the War Office note.

"Oh, lud," Sarah finally said, picking up the missive herself and tearing it open with one hand. Her eyes scanned the letter, but her face remained neutral. It only took her a few seconds to get through the entire thing, but when she finished, she let out an enormous sigh. "Well, that was to be expected, but I cannot say you'll take it as good news just now." She folded the missive with a flick of her finger and tossed it onto the desk. "They're giving you a promotion after your work on the Hunisett assignment."

Alec would have groaned if he had felt the energy to do so just then. Instead he collapsed in the chair behind the desk, letting his head fall back against the leather of the seat. Sarah adjusted Michael again.

"I thought that might be your feelings on the matter," she said. "I'm going to take Michael to Nurse, and then we should leave for Crawley House."

Alec looked up quickly. "Crawley House?"

Sarah had begun walking toward the door but turned back at her husband's words. "Yes, we're to have tea there this afternoon. Lord Crawley wanted to speak with us about staffing changes at the Office. I suppose he knew this promotion was coming as well."

Alec shook his head against the leather of his chair. "I suppose," he mumbled.

"I'll be just a few moments," she said, turning back toward the door, Michael still squirming in her arms.

Alec gave a wave of his hand as his wife left the room. He thought several minutes had passed, but perhaps, it was only a few seconds as the door to the library opened again. He had expected to see Sarah coming back through it, but instead, he was surprised to see his nephew.

"Samuel!" Alec cried, straightening somewhat in his seat before realization struck him. "Shouldn't you be in Oxford?" And then, "Oh God, what have you done and how much time do we have to fix it before your mother finds out?"

Samuel, now a man of twenty years and a scholar at Oxford, looked every bit like his adoptive father. Samuel walked with the

same distinctive gait as Alec's brother, Nathan, and often times, flashed a smile that was very familiar. As he did now.

"I promise I have done nothing to cause trouble recently, and you are in no danger of hearing from my mother."

Alec smiled and relaxed back into his seat. "Then what brings you to London?" Alec straightened suddenly again. "Am I supposed to offer you a drink now?" He looked about him as his mind had suddenly gone blank in regards to the location of the liquor cart in the library.

Samuel laughed and waved him off. "No, I'm quite fine. Thank you, Uncle Alec," Samuel said.

"Well, then at least have a seat and tell me what brings you to the old homestead today," Alec said, gesturing to a chair in front of the desk.

As Samuel took a seat, Alec felt oddly like his father in that moment. He shook his head, his mind too overloaded to consider another matter on which thoughts and emotion would be thick and turbulent.

Samuel sported rather sharp attire for a university lad with a well-tailored coat and breeches in a dark navy. His hair was well-clipped and brushed back from his face, and Alec suddenly wondered if the lad had a lady love. Surely, if he didn't already, he would soon with looks like those.

"I've come to ask for a favor of sorts, I'm afraid," Samuel said.

Alec raised an eyebrow, feeling incredibly stretched as it was when it came to demands on his time. But for Samuel, there was likely nothing that Alec wouldn't do.

"And what is that, Master Samuel?" Alec asked, imagining all sorts of favors involving attracting the attention of the opposite sex, ducking a bad grade at university or impressing-

"It has to do with your seat in Parliament," Samuel said.

Alec felt his jaw drop slightly, but somehow Samuel's words were less surprising than they should have been.

"How's that?" Alec asked.

Samuel adjusted in his seat, the motion unlike Samuel's usual unflinching manner. "You see, Uncle Alec, I've been working on a theory of sorts, but it would require input at the parliamentary level."

Alec nodded. "Go on," he said.

Samuel licked his lips. "I've been studying behavioral topics at university. That is the science behind ensuring an ordered society, and I have great ideas for a policing force in London. A body that would be tasked with keeping the streets safe and the citizens orderly so the city may prosper."

Alec nodded. "I believe I have heard of your endeavor in these

parts,” Alec said. “What does that have to do with my seat in Parliament?”

“Well, I know Parliament has just sat for the season, and I was hoping you may find the opportunity to bring a policing force act to the floor.”

Alec sat up, the muscles in his arms, chest, legs tightening. “Are you suggesting that I use my seat in the House of Lords to establish a policing force in London?”

Samuel blinked, tilting his head ever so slightly to the side. “Yes, I believe that is what I’m asking.”

Alec stared at his nephew.

“I would help you with it, of course,” Samuel rushed to add. “I mean, I have studied the subject now to some length, and I believe I grasp the principles behind an effective force, and I could lend my-“

Alec held up a hand. “Do you understand what it takes to get a bunch of old men who are more concerned about being pampered and getting what they are entitled to, to even think on such matters as public safety?”

Samuel blinked at him.

Alec leaned his elbows on the desk and sank his head into his hands. “Samuel, I admire you for your motivation, but I cannot imagine the fight you have before you to have such an act considered.”

Alec had closed his eyes halfway through his statement, and when he opened them, he was somewhat taken aback by the sharp focus in Samuel’s gaze.

“What if something were to happen to Aunt Sarah?” Samuel said, his words so unexpected they had Alec sitting up. “What if Sarah were to encounter a footpad? An increasingly common problem here in the city largely due to a lack of police force.”

But as he mulled over the words, he shook his head at them. “Aunt Sarah,” Alec repeated. “Truly?”

Samuel frowned, shaking his own head. “I suppose Aunt Sarah was a poor choice,” Samuel admitted.

“I pity the man who thinks to accost Sarah,” Alec mumbled, and Samuel nodded in agreement.

“But perhaps if another member of the family were to be confronted by a thief. What if-“

Alec held up a hand. “I understand your point, Samuel,” Alec said. “I just wish not to speak of the possibilities when the possibilities could be so tragic.” Samuel remained silent then, and Alec drew a deep breath. “Samuel, what you are asking may not be likely to happen in a single session of Parliament. Are you prepared to dedicate a great deal of time to this?”

He watched Samuel, expecting a concise and direct answer from the young man, but Alec was surprised when Samuel appeared to truly think the matter through. In the silence, Alec's own thoughts turned to Sarah and the possibility of something befalling her or one of their children when they made a social visit or shopped on Marlborough. The notion seemed ludicrous, but still, it was possible. And London had seemed to be getting rougher as men returned from war, and the city shifted into another phase of existence.

"I understand," Samuel said, getting to his feet. "I appreciate your insight, Uncle."

Alec stood as well. "Wait just a moment," Alec said, holding up a hand as if to stop the boy.

Samuel turned, his gaze no less direct, his jaw firm.

"You're truly serious about this?" Alec asked then, and Samuel nodded.

"Very," he said.

Alec lowered his outstretched hand. "Then you'd better give me some time to think on it."

* * *

"Why was it, again, that you did not tell him no immediately?"

"Because I love to be tested," Alec mumbled as he handed Sarah up into the Lofton carriage minutes later.

Sarah frowned as she took the forward-facing bench, smoothing her skirts as she did so. "You are apparently keen on punishment, my lord," she said, but her words held no conviction.

Alec looked at her as he settled into the bench opposite "Do you think Samuel's idea has merit?"

Sarah blinked at him. "You would ask such a question of your lowly-bred wife?" she said with a smirk that brought a fleeting smile to Alec's lips.

"I would," he said. "I'm rather unconventional, as it were."

The carriage started off, the wheels bouncing along the cobblestones of the streets.

Sarah smiled, gripped the bench, and said, "I think Samuel's idea is rather brilliant. He should be commended for even thinking on ways in which the city of London could be made a safer environment for its citizens."

"But to bring an act before Parliament?" Alec asked. "You know what the House of Lords is like."

Sarah shook her head. "How would I know that?" she asked. "In case you haven't looked recently, I am not of a suitable nature to acquire a seat in the House of Lords."

“Is that because of your lowly breeding?”

Sarah kicked his foot as the carriage bounced along, and he laughed, feeling a lightness in his chest that the day’s events had prevented.

“But you know all too well what the gentlemen of Parliament are like. They are only out for the betterment of their own positions,” he said, returning to the turmoil of his thoughts.

Sarah frowned again.

“Surely, some of them would be interested in improving the safety of London’s citizens.”

Alec shrugged, turning his gaze to the window. The city landscape shifted past them and with it, Alec’s thoughts. He couldn’t seem to stretch his mind between the demands of the Bedford estate, his promotion at the War Office, and Samuel’s plea.

Samuel’s plea.

Alec looked back at Sarah, her hands folded neatly in her lap, her golden hair tucked under the brim of her cap. If something happened to her....

“I’m not sure,” he finally said, pushing away the thought.

“Alec, do you believe that Samuel is the only person to think of instituting a policing force in London?” Sarah asked.

Alec shifted, his thoughts taking on a new angle. “You think others have thought of it?”

Sarah shrugged now. “I’m sure it’s not such a taboo subject as you believe it to be.”

Alec shook his head. “I do not think it taboo. I think it simply a herculean task to move such an act through our nation’s government.”

Sarah nodded. “And when was it that you were not afraid of such a task, my lord?”

She grinned at him, but he did not return her mirth now, Samuel’s words ricocheting through his head.

What if something happened to Aunt Sarah?

“When I was significantly younger, I’m afraid,” he said.

Sarah’s smile softened. “I think the problem is not helping Samuel with this very important and influential endeavor. I think the problem you struggle with now has a lot more to do with your other duties as both an earl and a spy for the War Office.”

Alec squinted his eyes. “I beg your pardon.”

Sarah stood, her body swaying as the carriage rolled forward. Alec reached up to help her sit on the bench next to him, and she slipped her hand into his.

“Alec, I believe I am not the only one as of late to notice your increased responsibilities towards the Lofton estates and with those responsibilities, your required presence at the House of Lords. More so

than ever before.”

Alec shook his head again, his mind reeling back to his responsibilities as a future duke until he believed his thoughts would give him motion sickness.

“I’m not really certain how my father did it to be honest.”

Sarah reached up, pushing Alec’s hat back as she ran her fingers through his hair. Her touch soothed him as it always did, but her nearness brought a heightened edge to his thoughts.

What if something happened to her? Her eyes were clear azure pools that beckoned him, her skin a pearly expanse that called his touch. Her smile...

God, he couldn’t let anything happen to her.

“I think the difference is when you’re father was doing both there came a time when war itself demanded more from him than when at peace,” Sarah said, interrupting his thoughts.

“Do you mean he may have neglected his duties at the War Office when war was not an imminent threat?”

Sarah shrugged. “How else could he have managed a dukedom, raised a family, and earned such respect from the Office?” Alec only blinked at her. “Have you never asked him?” she said.

Alec continued to blink at her, his mind going back to uncountable conversations with his father.

“I take it you have not,” she said when he did not speak. “Nathan doesn’t seem to feel pressed to stay in town all year. I think you’ll find him quite happily up to his elbows in manure as he fertilizes his fields just now.”

“Have you ever wondered what Bedford would be like this time of year?” Alec asked suddenly, his mind having settled on a long ago memory of running through the fields in Bedford with Nathan when they were small boys.

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “You mean to be in the countryside during the spring?”

Alec nodded while Sarah seemed to think it over.

“I can’t honestly say that I have, but one keeps quite busy when tending to three small children while maintaining her status as a female operative in England’s spy network.”

This drew a brief laugh from him, but then his expression turned serious. “Do you think, perhaps, an issue may become so incredibly important that it makes other matters that were once held dear as seeming less so?”

Sarah returned Alec’s hat to its proper place as the carriage rolled to a stop. “I believe as a person grows his environment and circumstance changes to allow other things to take priority.”

The door opened as the tiger set down the step. Alec moved,

stepping out of the carriage to hand Sarah down. Sarah picked up her skirts, moving to the open door, and had just set a single foot on the pavement when it happened.

He wasn't sure from where the man had come, but he did see the flash of his knife in the watery afternoon light. Sarah froze beside him with a single foot on the pavement, the other on the carriage step. He stood frozen as well, his arm laced through hers.

"I'll be 'aving that reticule now, m'lady, and them's pretty ear bobs as well," the man said to Sarah, and Alec took a moment to notice the man's deplorable state of dress and even more noticeable odor. "And what 'ave you got, goven'r, for me pockets?" the man asked, looking at Alec.

What if something happens to Aunt Sarah?

Inside of him, something snapped. It was as if the thing were tangible and made a sound as it broke. But suddenly, his thoughts went quiet for the first time days, his focus sharp as the things he once worried on melted away.

Sarah looked at him then wearing an expression he had seen her don on so many assignments for the War Office. He returned her gaze, his jaw tightening as he realized what she was about to do.

"Right then," she said.

Alec's grip on her arm tightened as she spoke, and leaning into him for balance, Sarah brought up the desired reticule, swinging it in an arc that blasted through the footpad's knife, sending the instrument flying. Using the momentum of the swing and the fact that her skirts were still slightly higher as they were out of place from riding in the carriage, she brought up the foot that had not managed to make it to the pavement and spread her leg in a powerful kick that connected with the thug's kneecap. Alec heard a pop just before the footpad cried out and collapsed, his body hitting the pavement with a thud.

Sarah brought her foot down and straightened her skirts before turning to him.

"I suppose Samuel may be right about that policing force, my lord," she said.

Alec frowned at the footpad, thrashing on the pavement as he held the offended knee.

"I suppose he is," Alec mumbled, and then looked up at her. "Will you make my excuses to Lord Crawley? I suddenly have an urgent matter to attend to before I leave for Bedford in the morning."

Sarah smiled. "Of course, my lord."

* * *

"You haven't left for Bedford yet?" Richard asked when he saw his son

coming through the townhouse door.

"I plan to leave at first light tomorrow," Alec said, shedding his hat and coat. "I have some sudden business matters to handle, but first, may I have a moment?"

Richard raised an eyebrow. There was something about his son's energetic and focused expression that suggested something had happened, but as Richard had only seen the lad hours earlier, he wasn't sure what was going on. Richard looked down at himself, his coat half on as he held his gloves and hat in one hand.

"I'm to meet Jane in the park for a stroll," Richard said. "She's returning from the afternoon lecture on mating habits of African bats at the College."

Alec raised an eyebrow but as he was likely used to Jane's penchant for unusual learning opportunities, the boy did not say anything even as his countenance remained concerned.

Richard shrugged off the coat, returning it along with the gloves and hat to the footman who had been assisting him.

"I suppose I can give you a moment," Richard said.

Alec nodded toward the drawing room at the front of the house, his stride clipped and efficient. Richard turned but stopped when Alec handed the footman a note.

"Please see that this is delivered to White's. Master Samuel said he would be in residence there until this evening. I must speak with him right away."

Richard raised his eyebrow again, nearly certain something had happened, but moved into the drawing room where Alec shut the doors behind them.

"I have a feeling you're about to make a pronouncement of great import," Richard said, not bothering to sit but instead turned to face his son.

Alec stood as well, his hands on his hips.

"How did you choose?" he said.

Richard did not need to ask his son what he meant. "I didn't have much freedom in the matter," he said.

"Because you inherited the title so young?"

Richard shook his head. "I believe I was rather fortunate in that my services at the War Office were not in high demand during most of your upbringing. And the estates." He paused and thought for a moment, recalling the days when he had been the one overseeing the accounts. He shook his head. "In my day, son, the estates ran themselves. With a good steward and game warden, there wasn't much a duke had to do. But you." He pointed at Alec and shook his head. "You, son, will have a lot on your plate. Times have brought with it numerous changes. The improvements in agriculture forced

about by the war with Napoleon when imports were cut off and the subsequent increase in domestic farming.” He shook his head. “Our estates are producing yields much greater than anything I had to deal with.” Richard looked at Alec with a frown. “No, son, I do not believe I could have managed the dukedom and my role at the War Office if things were as they are now.”

Alec watched him carefully, and Richard stood a little taller under the scrutiny. It was an odd feeling to have one’s adult son survey one in the hopes that the parent would have answers that had been overlooked in solving some dilemma. But Richard knew he had no answers. He could only give his son the guidance he thought the younger man needed.

“What’s happened?” Richard asked then when Alec did not speak.

“Sarah and I were set upon by a footpad,” Alec said without feeling, but Richard could see the way his son’s shoulders tensed at the words.

Richard took a step forward. “Are you both unharmed?”

Alec nodded quickly, but his gaze traveled to the wall behind Richard as an uncomfortable thought seemed to pass through his mind.

“Sarah quickly disarmed the man, but it was a rather stunning episode.”

Richard nodded but did not offer further comment.

“Which one would you have given up first?” Alec asked then.

Richard laughed, the sound a blast of noise in the otherwise quiet room. “Good God, son, that is not a question,” Richard said. “I would have resigned my post at the War Office immediately. There is nothing in a post as an agent that can make up for a crumbling title or a neglected family.”

Alec nodded as he peered out of the window at the traffic moving along the street outside. Richard moved toward the door, knowing Jane would be waiting for him.

“Alec,” Richard said, getting the man’s attention. “Are you asking for permission to resign your post at the War Office?”

Alec hesitated, and Richard saw the muscles in the other man’s shoulders bunching as his eyes drifted away. Richard smiled, recognizing the expression as one he’d often employed himself.

“No, not really,” Alec said. “I guess what I’m trying to ask you is when does one make a decision to pursue a different course of action than the one previously maintained for most of one’s life.”

Richard paused, his thoughts going back to a long ago time when the woman he loved refused to marry him, and he smiled. “You make the decision when the alternative is something with which you cannot live.”

Alec made no indication that he had heard him, but Richard knew his words would make sense to his son.

"I had thought as much," Alec finally said. "And I guess that time has come."

Richard smiled. "The realization is always the first step. Good luck, son," Richard said.

He opened the door to find Samuel rushing through it, and he quickly stepped out of the way. The young lad seemed to be quite intent on entering the drawing room.

"Grandfather," he said, his smile so like the manner in which Richard's older son and Samuel's adoptive father smiled, that for a moment, Richard thought he saw his son standing before him. Richard shook his head and brought Samuel in close for a hug. His grandson was never too old for a hug.

"Well, I suppose your sudden appearance in town when you should be at university studying means you have something to do with your uncle's decision to resign from the War Office."

Samuel looked up quickly, his jaw falling open as he looked at Alec. Alec took a step toward them, but Richard held up his hand.

"Whatever it is, I support you both fully." He moved through the doors of the drawing room. "But if I am late, Jane will have my head. I bid you both farewell."

He waved blithely as he took up his coat and hat once more. As he walked toward the front door, he heard Alec behind him.

"So tell me about this theory of yours, Samuel," Alec said.

And Richard smiled.

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About the Author

Jessie decided to be a writer because the job of Indiana Jones was already filled.

Taking her history degree dangerously, Jessie tells the stories of courageous heroines, the men who dared to love them, and the world that tried to defeat them.

Jessie makes her home in the great state of New Hampshire where she lives with her husband and two very opinionated Basset hounds. For more, visit her website at jessieclever.com.